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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000303

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DAKAR PLS PASS RAO, DAO, AND ODC

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SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: CONVERSATION WITH ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS
LEADER

REF: BANJUL 297 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Prominent Islamic figure Imam Baba Leigh registered strong concern over human rights abuses following the failed coup plot in March. He also indicated frustration over The Gambia's "cowed and co-opted" Islamic religious establishment to confront the GOTG over the abuses. Baba Leigh judged that the country's overall stability remained intact, but pointed to an apprehensive mood in the capital. He assessed President Jammeh's popular base in Banjul as slipping somewhat, but nonetheless predicted his re-election in the fall, especially if the opposition parties failed to unite behind a sole candidate. Baba Leigh did not think that massive rigging of the 2006-7 national elections by the GOTG and ruling party was likely; we note that the opposition parties continue to insist that they will participate in these contests. END SUMMARY.

OVERVIEW

2. (U) Ambassador met recently with prominent Islamic religious figure and Embassy contact, Imam Baba Leigh, for tour d'horizon regarding The Gambia's internal situation in the aftermath of the coup plot thwarted here March 21 (reftel). A former International Visitor Program (IVP) grantee, Baba Leigh is known for his progressive, reformist views, as exemplified by his firm, public opposition to FGM. He maintains contacts within America's Islamic community and plans a visit to the U.S. soon.

THE GAMBIA'S "WORRISOME" SITUATION

3. (C) Asked for his assessment of The Gambia's socio-political environment following the failed coup plot, Baba Leigh described it as "worrisome," expressing particular concern over the GOTG's silence amidst ongoing reports of authorities' mistreatment of detainees suspected of involvement in the plot. He said that the GOTG's effort to ferret out anyone conceivably involved in the plot had affected him personally, recounting that his nephew had recently been taken into custody. According to Baba Leigh, authorities had picked up the nephew, serving as hotel manager here, not on the basis of any evidence, but merely because the hotel's Lebanese owner, who was out of the

country on vacation, was suspected of financially supporting the overthrow attempt. Baba Leigh asserted that he was able to get the nephew freed on bail only after several days of repeated personal approaches to senior judicial and police officials.

ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT'S RESPONSE

14. (C) In response to Ambassador's query, Baba Leigh said while other Islamic religious leaders in The Gambia shared his concern over the GOTG's human rights abuses following the failed coup plot, they had so far been unwilling to go public with their concern or confront the GOTG leadership. He remarked that, "in times past," members of the country's Islamic religious establishment would have insisted on meeting with President Jammeh to urge an end to the abuses and sanctioning of those responsible. Baba Leigh confided that he personally had asked to see Jammeh, but that Presidential staffers had told him that an appointment would have to be requested through the country's Supreme Islamic Council; the Council's Chairman declined to make the request, according to Baba Leigh. Explaining the Gambian Islamic religious leadership's failure to act, he asserted that the latter was both "cowed and co-opted" by Jammeh.

THE COUNTRY'S STABILITY

15. (C) Baba Leigh judged that, in the coup plot's aftermath, The Gambia's stability remained intact. At the same time, he observed that, amidst the seemingly calm, business-as-usual atmosphere, an apprehensive mood persisted among many citizens in the capital. He said that further attempts to topple Jammeh could not be ruled out, while adding that he was personally not aware of any current plotting.

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PROSPECTS FOR CREDIBLE ELECTIONS

16. (C) Baba Leigh, echoing the views of other sources, anticipated that the opposition parties would be allowed to run credible campaigns and genuinely compete for votes in the Presidential and National Assembly elections scheduled for October 2006 and January 2007, respectively. He hastened to add that the playing field would hardly be level, as the GOTG and ruling APRC party would exploit -- and abuse -- the advantages of incumbency to the hilt in terms of resources allocated to the electioneering. However, Baba Leigh did discount prospects for massive GOTG/APRC rigging of these contests, saying Jammeh wanted to avoid being seen as an "illegitimate leader" by winning an election clearly seen as a sham. Baba Leigh judged that, while Jammeh's popular base of support was slipping somewhat in the capital (primarily due to the citizenry's economic woes, in Baba Leigh's view) the President retained enough popularity in the hinterland to win re-election -- especially if, as seemed increasingly likely, the opposition parties failed to unite behind a single candidate to challenge Jammeh.

COMMENT

17. (C) Baba Leigh made clear his concern over the deterioration in the country's human rights record of late -- and his frustration over the Islamic religious establishment's failure to approach the GOTG on this score. Baba Leigh's progressive views are not shared by all Islamic clerics here, and the Supreme Islamic Council's leadership, in particular, strikes us as a bastion of more conservative, traditional thought. We also find plausible that a "cowed and co-opted" religious establishment, as characterized by Baba Leigh, contributes to its lack of activism over the human rights abuses following the failed overthrow attempt.

As for the 2006-7 elections, it is noteworthy that Baba Leigh, who claimed to have no partisan leaning, downplayed prospects of massive rigging by the GOTG/APRC. The opposition parties themselves continue to tell us that -- notwithstanding Jammeh's backsliding of late on human rights -- they will refrain from boycotting the elections because they believe that they will have enough of a chance to compete for votes to warrant their participation. END COMMENT.

STAFFORD